

WILLIAM VAUGHN MOODY AND THE
MOVEMENT FOR POETIC DRAMA IN AMERICA

BY
MARY LOUISE DILWORTH
A.B., Knox College, 1936
A.M., University of Illinois, 1938

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
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The following study began from a reading of William Vaughn Moody's *Letters to Harriet* and a suggestion from Percy MacKaye. In the introduction to these letters, MacKaye tells how five poets, comrades in lyric arms he calls them, banded together in the early 1900's to improve the status of American drama by writing poetic plays. The five young poets—William Vaughn Moody, Percy MacKaye, Ridgely Torrence, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Josephine Preston Peabody—continued to work together toward the creation of an American poetic drama in the first decade of the twentieth century. No one, MacKaye points out, has considered Moody in relation to this circle of poet-playwrights. Moody's letters, edited by Daniel Gregory Mason, chronicle mainly his University of Chicago years, while the later *Letters to Harriet* deal largely with Moody's interest in the theatre from 1901 until 1909, and offer a background for the study of his dramatic works. According to MacKaye, that study remains to be done.

The following pages propose to follow out something of MacKaye's suggestion, even though the writer is aware that only MacKaye or Torrence, the two members of the group still living, can adequately present the aspirations and accomplishments of Moody and the other comrades in lyric arms. In order to recognize the significance of these playwrights, it has seemed fitting to project their work against a background of their contemporary American drama, and to emphasize the desire for poetic drama on the one hand, and "the great American play" on the other. In order to evaluate the works of Moody and MacKaye and Torrence, it has been necessary to consider not only those plays written in verse as poetic drama but to extend the term to cover those works in poetic prose and in folk-rhythmed speech. Furthermore it has seemed fitting to center the more important plays

about the themes which the authors sought to dramatize and to make some attempt to evaluate those plays both in relation to those playwright's purpose and in relation to the aims of the five poet-dramatists as a group. To see how the ideals of these five merged with the course of American drama, it is necessary to follow the activities of certain playwrights, most notably of Torrence and MacKaye, from approximately 1914 to 1930.

Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, Moody is the central personality of the group. Therefore the author of this present study proposes to devote much more space to his activities, his works, and his comments than to any other one playwright. Moody's *Letters to Harriet* give a clearer record of the activities of the five than any other letters and journals. Moody's friendship for each of the others and his enthusiasm for the American theatre helped to keep all the group working toward a common goal. Moody's play, *The Great Divide*, was hailed as "the great American drama" and enjoyed the greatest popular success of any play written by members of the group. Although the entire body of Moody's work is small, only two poetic dramas and a fragment of the third, and two plays in poetic prose, it reveals a uniform artistry in execution and a nobility of thought.

At the close of the nineteenth century, although the general trend in the theatre was toward realism, hope for the floriation of the poetic drama revived. On the Continent, in the last decade of the century, such dramatists as Hauptmann in Germany, D'Annunzio in Italy, and Rostand and Maeterlinck in France were at work on plays that were poetic both in concept and in form. In Ireland, Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, George Moore, and John Millington Synge resolved to write for the newly formed Irish National Theatre, to draw their material from folk-lore and ancient sagas, and to give it expression in peasant speech. In England, poetic drama lacked the impetus and vitality of an entire cultural renaissance, but the success of Stephen Phillips's plays, elaborately produced by Sir Herbert

Beerbohm Tree, gave other poet-playwrights hope. Indeed the poetic drama of the twentieth century looked upon him as its apogee. Such plays as *Herod* and *Paolo and Francesca* used traditionally literary themes, long familiar to the audience, one or not more than two "star" characters, and a plot so exciting that the spectator was willing to listen to long poetic interruptions to see how it all turned out.

America, too, hoped for a poetic theatre. As early as 1885, Clarence Stedman in his *Poets of America* had appealed to young poets to turn to the theatre where they might find a wider audience than through the printed page. Critics like William Archer and H. W. Boynton and Richard Burton were asking whether it was possible to revitalize poetic drama and what might be the most skillful means. American poets followed their advice and looked to Stephen Phillips as the most worthy model; although they relied on elaborate settings and costuming to redeem all sorry fustian and win over a public otherwise hostile to verse in the theatre, no American producer could be found who was willing to risk thousands of dollars upon a shaky box office. The Arthurian plays of Richard Hovey, the historical plays of Mrs. Dargan and Edgar Lee Masters and Barrett Wendell remained in rather obscure printed volumes, unproduced by a commercial theatre, which saw that these efforts one and all lacked vitality. Theirs was a curious eclecticism that took an ancient Chaldean setting, perhaps, and added seventeenth century diction and nineteenth century psychology. Furthermore the details of staging were difficult; scenes shifted, for instance in such a play as Hovey's *The Quest of Merlin*, quickly and strangely, while the *dramatis personae* included fairies and maenads, and muses and angelic guardians of the Grail.

The American poets of the closet drama were concerned far more with the imitation than with any original creation. Cale Young Rice's *Charles di Tocca* (1903) and *David* (1904) follow Stephen Phillips's pattern, save that Rice strives to work up an even greater pitch of excitement with more striking incidents than Phillips used. Barrett Wendell's *Raleigh in Guiana* (1902)

and *A Christmas Masque* (1902) are deliberate imitations of Elizabethan drama, even to the blank verse and the archaisms of diction. Edgar Lee Masters in *Maximilian* (1902) and Mrs. Olive Tilford Dargan in *Carlotta* (1906) selected the unhappy lot of the Austrian-French emperor and his wife for the subjects of highly florid verse tragedy in a colorful Mexican setting. Mrs. Dargan's other attempts to dramatize the life of Poe in *The Poet* (1906) and the downfall of a warrior woman of ancient Assyria in *Semiramis* (1906) have a tedium that even the Marlovian sonority of names cannot rescue. Madison Cawein's experimentation with shadowy fantasies in *The Shadow Garden* (1910) ends with a prettified clutter of the souls of flowers and grass and moonbeams scarcely worth any producer's effort. Mrs. Mary Austin's Indian play, *The Arrow-Maker*, produced at the New Theatre in New York in 1911, indicates a tendency to center poetic talent upon distinctly American themes, exploiting the picturesqueness of our varied locale. Although it is scarcely an accurate presentation of Indian thought, *The Arrow-Maker* is significant as an attempt to discern poetic dramatic material in Indian life and customs.

Despite occasional experimental efforts, Hovey, Masters, Rice, Wendell, Cawein, Mrs. Dargan, and Mrs. Austin left the poetic drama still unwanted by the robust American stage. Without experience as actors or producers, they jumbled the dramatically effective with the dramatically impossible. They continued to study Stephen Phillips, and to read such Elizabethan dramatists as Marlowe, Greene, Peele, and Kyd. They employed their skill in imitation rather than in the creation of either new rhythms or new dramatic form. Furthermore, they kept their themes historically remote, safely shadowed by castle walls and parapets, where a tyrant lord might carve out his rival's heart with impunity. Yet it is scarcely just to discount the failures of these playwrights, florid and bombastic as they now appear three decades later, for by their very attempts in verse-drama they helped to guide a more successful group of young writers toward poetry in the American theatre.

By 1905, five young poets had banded together to besiege Broadway with plays not only poetic but also dramatically acceptable to producer and public alike. They were dissatisfied with the dramatized novels, the farces, and the musical comedies that the producers offered a public demanding "a good show." They were likewise dissatisfied with the lifeless and unstageable poetic plays, frequently printed but rarely produced. Bound together only by friendship and devotion to a common aim, they formulated few aesthetic tenets, but they turned eagerly to each new endeavor and offered criticism and encouragement, one to the other. William Vaughn Moody, Percy MacKaye, Josephine Preston Peabody, Ridgely Torrence, and Edwin Arlington Robinson were the five comrades in lyric arms who resolved to write poetic plays to be produced as well as read. Widely read in literatures, classic and modern, Continental and English, all brought to the theatre a so-called "academic" background, a veneration for the literary heritage of the past, and a devotion to Greek and Renaissance drama.

The five had much in common. With the exception of Torrence, who had attended Miami University and Princeton, they all attended Harvard in overlapping years. Upon leaving Harvard, they became teachers or editors, with the exception of Robinson, who devoted himself to his writing. Miss Peabody taught at Wellesley College; Moody at the University of Chicago; MacKaye at the Craigie School for Boys in New York City. But one by one they determined to devote their entire time to poems and plays, and by 1905 all save Torrence, who continued on the staff of the *Critic*, were hard at work on verse plays. Each had one or more published volumes to his credit. Miss Peabody had brought out her first volume of verse, *The Wayfarers*, in 1898, followed by the first play, *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, in 1900. Torrence had attempted half-serious, half-humorous aphoristic quatrains in *The House of a Hundred Lights* (1900). MacKaye had completed *A Garland to Sylvia* in 1899. Robinson, to whom recognition came more slowly, had privately printed *The Torrent and the Night Before* in 1896, *The Children of the Night* the following year, and *Captain Craig* in 1902. Moody had gathered

together twenty-three poems in a slender volume copyrighted in 1901, twenty-three extraordinarily finished and diverse efforts, ranging all the way from the political and social protest of the "Ode in the Time of Hesitation" and "Gloucester Moors" to the mysticism of "Good Friday Night" and to the excoriating satire of "The Menagerie."

As the group worked together in the first decade of the twentieth century, they came to share what MacKaye called the "unstinted zest of comrades." Robinson, who always doubted his own dramatic ability, was a ready and astute critic; Torrence was a genial companion; Moody, MacKaye, and Miss Peabody were the serious practitioners of the new American verse drama. By 1904, each had finished two or more plays. Miss Peabody had followed the story of Mr. W. S. with the story of Marlowe (1901). Moody had finished *The Masque of Judgment* (1900) and *The Fire-Bringer* and one version of *The Faith Healer*. MacKaye had completed not only the unpublished *Garland to Sylvia*, which gained him a commission from E. H. Southern, but *The Canterbury Pilgrims* (1903) as well. MacKaye and Moody, perhaps, more than any of the others, were drawn together by a sympathy and understanding and a concern for the future rôle of the theatre in America. Both MacKaye and Moody passed through years of social protest, most especially against the imperialism which America evinced in the Spanish American War and against the growing industrialism within the nation itself. Moody and MacKaye alike saw the theatre as "the place for young Americans who want to do something," and a place where they might reach a wider audience than with isolated lyrics. For Moody the query was ever the same, unsolved and dichotomous: the theme replete with beauty and ideality on the one hand and the practical stage on the other, the poetic drama with wizardry of image and word here and the "ice-cream eating public" there. Moody, MacKaye, and the other poet comrades found no complete solution.

MacKaye stood out as the crusader, the spokesman, the arch-propagandist of poetic drama. Unlike any of the others, he had

grown up in the theatre; dim memories of his father's *Hazel Kirke* and the melodramatic *Paul Kewlar* and his mother's dramatized version of *Pride and Prejudice*, together with more vivid recollections of *Columbus*, were a part of his dramatic heritage before he entered Harvard in 1893. In his Commencement oration in 1897, entitled "The Need for Imagination in the Drama Today", he proclaimed the dramatic poet as the long-awaited messiah of the American theatre. After his graduation MacKaye continued to dream great dreams and see bright visions finally voiced in a series of lectures printed under the title *The Playhouse and the Play* (1909) and *The Civic Theatre* (1912). Here MacKaye sought to arouse the thinking, theatre-going public to the abuses of the current stage that obeyed the Law of Dramatic Deterioration. Even the intellectual drama of Ibsen, MacKaye argued, had little to offer American audiences in its portrayal of individuals discouraged in their struggle of living. Rather, the American Drama of Democracy should peer back into the Yankee past and forward into the promise of the future and create "living symbols in a living world." For MacKaye this new drama would inevitably be poetic drama, made by a poet who would obliterate the old nomenclatures of verse and prose, and invent images in the "emotional cadences of speech."

To create a drama that would suit what MacKaye liked to call "the vast young vision of our democracy," Torrence and Miss Peabody and MacKaye all began with historic themes long familiar from previous literary treatment. The precedent of the historical novel, with such best-sellers as *The Crisis*, *Richard Carvel*, and *Janice Meredith*, and the historical play, with, for instance, such a current "hit" as *Ben Hur*, perhaps gave them special impetus, although they diverged from the general movement of American romance in certain significant directions. First of all, they renounced any claim for immediate popular success. Though they turned to historical themes, they did not go immediately to the Revolution and the Civil War for the best-sellers, but instead sought out a literary past to be appreciated by those with a literary background similar to their own. Finally, the emphasis, they said, should be no longer on plot alone, on

what MacKaye scorned as "an appeal to the nervous systems," but the excitement of the narrative was to be relinquished in favor of the imagination that sought out the poetry hidden in the circumstance.

Perhaps more than any of the others, Torrence bridges the gap between the aims of the popular romancers in fiction and drama and those of the five poet-playwrights. Exciting action, heroic character, and glorious death, all in the Stephen Phillips manner, make up his first two dramas, *El Dorado* (1903) and *Abelard and Héloise* (1907). Prefaced by Poe's verse, *El Dorado* dramatizes the quest for gold and the fountain of youth, symbolizing man's perpetual search for the elusive and unattainable, but it is so filled with reversals of fortune and recognitions that the poetry and symbolism are lost. *Abelard and Héloise* marks a distinct advance both in plot and poetry, with more flexible verse, more fully sketched character, and less mad ravings and startling scenes. But neither effort contribute much to the historical verse genre. *El Dorado* is like Master's *Maximilian* and Mrs. Dargan's *Carlotta*, another undramatic treatment of a highly romantic theme, where the scenes are strung together in chronicle-play fashion; *Abelard and Héloise* has an air of prettified unreality, and offers poetry as a substitute for the play. Neither work satisfied Torrence. After Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske decided not to produce *Abelard and Héloise*, Torrence turned away from the historic verse play to prose comedy in *The Madstone*, which was neither produced nor published. From 1908 until 1914 Torrence wrote no plays, and when he did return to the theatre, it was in the poetry of Negro speech and folkways rather than in the historic costume play that he saw possibilities for a future poetic drama.

To turn from *El Dorado* and *Abelard and Héloise* to the plays of Josephine Preston Peabody and Percy MacKaye is to leave behind the recognitions and exciting incidents replete in some historical theme and to conceive the past as a visualization of a certain age, almost a picturization in both the poetic description and in the actual costuming and stage setting. MacKaye and Miss Peabody sought to interpret the past as a lyric past when

men sang for the sheer joy of being and as a colorful past when pomp and pageantry more nearly made up the fabric of men's lives than in the twentieth century. Miss Peabody's first plays, *Fortune and Men's Eyes* and *Marlowe*, indicate how wholly lyric was the mood in which they were conceived. Indeed the author is scarcely concerned with dramatic action at all, as she dwells on the details of her scene, and on the subtle analysis of Marlowe's mind, where the poet reveals his tortured quest for some permanent beauty in a world of change. Marlowe is of lyric stuff all compounded, wholly a woman's Marlowe, as Moody commented in a letter to Miss Peabody.

Miss Peabody's later plays, *The Piper* (1909) and *The Wolf of Gubbio* (1913) continue the same lyric vein of the earlier and more literary works. She now turned to already familiar medieval legend for a fairy tale quality which was to charm adults and children alike. Certainly a vagabond who pipes away rats and children, and a wolf humanized with tender emotions and poetic speech require a wizardry of atmosphere, the skillful fabrication of fairyland, to win over a modern audience. But that was the task which she set for herself. *The Piper*, which was chosen the Stratford Prize Play and produced in the Shakespeare Memorial theatre in 1910, retold the Hamelin story already familiar through Browning's poem. The narrative fabric was skillfully woven of legendary familiarity and artistic originality, with humor, pathos, mild suspense, and a wholly joyous ending as all the stolen children came trooping back to Hamelin town in a flood of rosy light. *The Wolf of Gubbio*, published in 1913 but unproduced on the professional stage, has the same theme, namely the liberation of men from their own fear and greed, and the same medieval atmosphere, only this time it is the twelfth century Umbria of St. Francis. Although the Wolf will never captivate his audience as the Piper did, his play has a greater technical perfection, more satire and whimsy, and a more completely lyrical and medieval atmosphere, with St. Francis as luminously haloed as if he had stepped from a Giotto painting.

Like Miss Peabody, MacKaye brought a lyric gift and a facile imagination to the literary and legendary past; like her, too, he

was both song-writer and scene-painter, concerned with the suggestion of a vast historical procession singing on its stately way across the stage. In his early plays, literary and historic as they are, ranging all the way from the Forest of Arden to Herculeum and back again to America, the panoramic, the spectacular, the pageantic qualities subordinate all else. *A Garland to Sylvia*, completed in 1899 but not published until 1910, blends the present and the past and moves on two distinct levels, with the poet-dramatist, Felix, in love with Sylvia, the heroine of his sixteenth century play; here in the light-hearted songs and dances of the rustics in the Forest of Arden and in the stately wedding procession MacKaye made his first effort to interrelate pantomime, music, and dance to the spoken word. *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, MacKaye's next play completed in 1903, has more color and movement, a simple, straightforward action, and the freedom, adventure, and joy of a fourteenth century English spring. Although the adventures of Chaucer and the Prioress and the Wife of Bath are spread thinly through the four acts of the play, plot for plot's sake is not the slightest concern of MacKaye, preoccupied as he is with the spirit of the place, the individual, and the crowd all objectified and translated into an almost plastic medium. In *Jeanne d'Arc* (1906) the preponderance of the scenic element and the superabundance of "paltry stage-osities," as Moody called them, detract from the exalted legend of the country maid from Domrémy, until the play appears decidedly superficial in comparison with Schiller's treatment of the same theme. Here all is not the straightforward movement of *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, but a string of episodes, depicting Jeanne's life from her joyous girlhood in Lorraine to her death as the martyr of France. Even her death is accidental and pathetic rather than tragic and inevitable, and of less importance to the dramatist than his numerous brightly tinted vignettes with the "lads and lasses of Lorraine" against the bright greens and blue of Domrémy.

After the success of *Jeanne d'Arc*, which Sothorn and Marlowe presented in 1906, MacKaye resented the stage failure of his next play, *Sappho and Phaon*, and looked upon it as a defeat for all poetic drama in America. Relying less upon spectacular

effects, *Sappho and Phaon* returns to the form and the problem of *A Garland to Sylvia*—in brief, how shall the dramatist best portray the “implanted love of ideality within us.” To suggest the interrelation of past and present, MacKaye attempts the use of various ledges of time and planes of action, the play-within-a-play structure, complicated with prologue, induction, and pantomimic interludes, before the tragedy proper unfolds. Time, MacKaye would seem to say in *Sappho and Phaon* and in *A Garland to Sylvia*, is a dream; life is too complex an interweaving of past and present to be sketched with simplicity, even for the practical demands of the theatre.

MacKaye and Torrence and Miss Peabody were votaries of the imaginative spirit which makes a romance of all things. In company with the authors of historical best-sellers and Broadway “hits,” they were protestants against the dreariness of photographic reality in fictional and dramatic art. Determined to embody “the implanted love of ideality within us,” they stepped into a past rich in literary and legendary association. As they turned to history, furthermore, the whole precedent of great poetic tragedy lay behind them; not a single great dramatist, neither Sophocles nor Shakespeare nor Racine, had attempted to make poetic drama from circumstances contemporaneous with him. These poet-playwrights knew that man perpetually imagines a golden age, or at least some Arcady more glorious than his own troubled day and therefore they set about to create an historical world of beauty and dream, where all that was ugly should be winnowed away. They were, therefore, unconcerned with tragedy, however much they used the term as a convenient subtitle. Pity and fear were alien emotions in their world of dream. Even *Jeanne d’Arc* and *Sappho and Phaon* leave the spectator with no sense of exaltation in the face of sacrifice and death, but rather with an impression of pathos that such capacity for beauty and wonder should perish. All sharp lines are softened in a romantic atmosphere of beauty, compounded of elements at once sensational, picturesque, and fantastic. Here is a world where bushes may change into ladies of Lorraine, where a piper may bewitch children, and a friar charm a wolf.

Unlike Torrence, MacKaye, and Miss Peabody, Moody did not turn to historical romance. Preoccupied as he was with social and moral problems, he sought a suitable medium for his thinking in the symbolical-mythological drama. MacKaye, who was to try his hand at almost all forms of poetic drama, also experimented with the mythological play, but for him it was not the serious, all-absorbing creation that it was for Moody. Moody kept asking himself the old riddles of every artist-thinker: why is a God of infinite goodness and love likewise a creator of evil? What is man's relation with God, and counterwise, what is God's relation with man? Moody, and to a lesser degree, MacKaye, might cry out against the injustices which they saw in modern life, but they saw no artistic promise in the dramatization of mere ugliness. Besides, they wanted something latent with symbolic possibilities, something large, almost protean, in scope, where man and God and demons and archangels could clash in numberless encounters of the forces of good and evil. It was almost inevitable that they should turn to dramatized mythology for their first essays of a kind of moral and ethical symbolism in the theatre, when the precedent of Greek poets and nineteenth century closet-dramatists lay directly behind them. Aeschylus and Shelley, Arnold and Swinburne, Bayard Taylor and Hovey — these merged into an almost inescapable tradition that selected some myth already long familiar and invested it with contemporary spirit and import either for an actual or a hypothetical theatre.

Both classic and romantic precedents were equally familiar to Moody and MacKaye. Students of Greek literature, translators of Greek fragments, and admirers of Greek drama, they knew that it was not unusual for the Athenian spectator to witness the dramatization of superhuman subjects as well as of those drawn from heroic legend. They were, futhermore, familiar with the whole romantic adaptation and distortion of the original classic form. They were educated in the best tradition of English poetry of the nineteenth century, with the closet-dramas of Shelley, Arnold, and Swinburne as a part of their reading. Since both Moody and MacKaye were so close to this nineteenth century tradition and so much more in spiritual unanimity with it

than with the fifth century B. C., it was almost inescapable that they should come under the influence of the closet-drama in their first efforts to build a symbolical-mythological play.

MacKaye's two symbolical verse dramas, *The Sistine Eve* (1901) and *Fenris the Wolf* (1905), remained unproduced. The former, subtitled a "lyric masque," was to celebrate the opening of the new century with the narration of the birth of Eve, the temptation of Eve, and the spiritual birth of man. The latter play abandoned all pseudo-Greek accoutrements and turned to a Norse myth which would symbolize the conquest of evil, namely the story of a water demon whom Odin chained in a cavern until such time as his wolfishness should be tamed. But the reader can never be quite sure of MacKaye's meaning, obviously symbolic as he feels it to be. Fenris and Freyja, the spirit of regenerative love, never come into the necessary conflict, and the rôle of Baldur, the spirit of beauty, remains indefinite. MacKaye would seem to have solved the problem of evil by saying that God gives man love and imagination to check the wolfishness within him and liberate the higher from the baser self. But here, as in his historical plays, it is the visual beauty inherent in the myth rather than the symbolic meaning which intrigues MacKaye, so that he lingers devotedly over the lights and shadows of his scene to create an atmosphere of almost Wagnerian splendor.

With MacKaye the symbolical-mythological drama forms but one strand of a highly diverse interest in the theatre; with Moody it is quite otherwise, composing, as it does, the bulk of his poetry and the corporate body of his thought. Because of the dichotomous idealism they seek to reconcile, rather than because of any dramatic potentialities, Moody's three poetic plays cannot be omitted from any consideration of this part in the movement for poetic drama, even though perhaps they were never intended to be "strictly dramatic and subject to the laws of dramatic speech and action," as Professor Manly believed. In a consideration of the poems, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that as Moody's interests in the theatre grow, he moved toward more and more dramatic form, and as he worked, the idea of a

trilogy slowly took shape, until in 1907 he had the whole plan vividly imagined. The idea of the unity of God and man was to bind together the three plays. *The Masque of Judgment*, written in 1897 and 1898, and printed in 1900, Moody called "a hopelessly fantastic thing," and surely he did not intend its archangels and Spirits of the Throne Lamps and scenes in the Valley of Judgment for the actual stage. Unlike MacKaye, Moody is not concerned with the scenic wonders of his subject matter; rather, he is preoccupied with the power of the idea, namely that God destroyed himself in destroying man, who is the equal of God and upon whom the whole existence of God depends.

The Fire-Bringer, published in 1904, four years after *The Masque of Judgment*, illustrates Moody's pursuance of the same God-and-man theme with Hellenic and classic rather than Hebraic and romantic materials. With something of the audacity of his Titan hero, Moody chose a myth already apotheosized by Aeschylus and Shelley, and invested it with a new and what he believed should be a distinctly twentieth century meaning. He toned down the extravagance of his earlier style, pruned away unnecessary scenes, added human characters to give poignancy to the myth, and created moments of considerable dramatic intensity, probably in the hope that this poetic drama might be produced. Like *Prometheus Pyrphoros*, the verse drama of Moody's friend, Trumbull Stickney, *The Fire-Bringer* incorporates the Deukalion and Pyrrha myth to give the story a human touch and make the theft of fire symbolize hope and joy. Stickney offers no hope, only a sense of futility, a "shadow of pain and bitterness upon the fair face of things," as Moody called it. The whole message of *The Fire-Bringer*, on the other hand, is one of hope; the fire in the fennel stalk brings joy to a passionless earth. But to attain that sacred fire of life, man must dare even as Prometheus, and God will bless him and call upon him for help.

This sense of the inseparability of God and man led Moody to the conclusion of the trilogy, which was to be the complete reconciliation of the human and divine in *The Death of Eve*. All that remains of the final play is the first act and two lyrics,

namely, "I Am the Woman" and "The Death of Eve." Although Moody felt "the organic rushing together of parts" necessary for the rounding out of the trilogy, the staging of *The Great Divide*, the revision and production of *The Faith Healer*, and almost incessant ill health kept him from work on the concluding drama. If one may judge from the fragments of the play, Moody's Eve is the proponent of the whole of life; even her sin was good, and she would return to the Garden to "sing her stifled meaning out to God." The "indestructible unity between God and man" was the philosophical concept which was to bind *The Death of Eve* to the other plays and to give a sense of unity to the entire trilogy. In the opening drama, *The Fire-Bringer*, man by his daring and his will separated himself from God; in the second play, *The Masque of Judgment*, God by his punishment of the earth separated himself from man and thereby sought to destroy himself; in the third, *The Death of Eve*, Eve through her suffering was to attain a vision of the reconciliation of God and man. In the treatment of the Prometheus myth, Zeus and the rebel Titan are really the same; indeed, since Prometheus vaguely senses that he "stands within the heart of God" (or Zeus), he will endure his suffering with glory. Time and suffering, then, both for Creator and created will bring a realization that neither exists without the other. And all mankind, like Eve, will have a vision of the glory of life and the goodness of God; like Eve, each earth-child will sing a song it "dimly understands" and lift "its soul to let the splendor stream."

Of the poet-playwrights in the "little circle," only Moody and MacKaye found the symbolical-mythological genre suitable for their purpose. With MacKaye it was only a passing phase of a theoretical interest that rushed hither and thither in all directions at once. With Moody it was the core of his creative work. To read *Fenris the Wolf* side by side with Moody's trilogy will amply illustrate the importance of the mythological play in the scheme of each author. And MacKaye himself would have been the first to acknowledge the superiority of his friend. Torrence, Robinson, and Miss Peabody—each knew that he dare not attempt such a cosmology. "I couldn't have written *The Fire-*

Bringer," Robinson once told Harriet Moody," but I can understand how Will could have done it." If Moody were less successful than the others, he dared more in the reconciliation of antinomies: Hellenic and Hebraic thought, paganism and mysticism, man and God. For these he needed the enthusiasm of Pandora and the audaciousness of the Fire-Bringer; for these he chose a form and style safely sheltered by tradition and rich with literature's goodly heritage.

While Moody and MacKaye were working on symbolical-mythological plays, they were also surveying the dramatic possibilities of the contemporary American scene. They were aware of certain native tendencies that had come into evidence now and again throughout the nineteenth century; perhaps the most persistent of these was the portrayal, even the caricature, of certain types of American character which the audience considered typical. As the century progressed, frontiersmen and colorful Westerners of all sort swaggered across the stage with guns and chaps. Kit the Arkansas Traveller became Davy Crockett, the frontiersman Young Lochinvar, who with courage and decision and a good strong arm won the fair maiden. And Davy Crockett in turn became the prototype for the Western diamond-in-the-rough hero, trader, trapper, cowboy, or whatever he happened to be. MacKaye and Moody were also aware that the dramatist who would appeal to the public could be almost assured of success with either a local color or an historical play. In the former, the short story with its exciting exploration of picturesque America gave him ample precedents; in the latter, the historical novel had pointed the way and found a public avid for romance. A combination of history and melodrama made almost sure-fire success. But both playwrights maintained that the American drama of the future would be neither popular melodrama nor prose realism, as Henry Arthur Jones argued. It should be poetic in conception if not in form, no matter what the subject.

MacKaye had no sooner finished his Elizabethan reverie and his lyric masque than he turned to the American historic scene in *The Scarecrow*, first completed in 1903, but not published until 1908 and not professionally produced until 1911. Of all Mac-

Kaye's works, his dramatization of Hawthorne's "Feathertop" remains perhaps his most original, a happy fusion of history, morality, and whimsy. MacKaye is bold enough to suggest a completely different handling from the moralized legend in *Mosses from an Old Manse*. What if Feathertop had felt his manhood more deeply? What if he of the "tender sensibilities" had realized more fully what rubbish he was? We are all, according to MacKaye, scarecrow-like and ridiculous rubbish compared with our ideals of perfection; indeed it is this quality more than mere foppishness which gives Lord Ravensbane his claim to universality in the story of his creation, his brief life, and his tragic death, although throughout, MacKaye's sympathy and sentimentality are scarcely as effective as Hawthorne's gentle irony. The scarecrow himself is considerably less convincing than his Mephistophelean tutor, who supplies the foil of sceptical irony to the human development of the pumpkin-headed puppet. Dickon, no longer the invocation of Mother Rigby, is a wonderful cosmopolitan devil, with an irresistible swagger and an abundance of Yankee wit. The whole play was MacKaye's contribution to the American historical drama and his reply to the playwrights who insisted upon melodrama to win their audiences. A New England witch, a Yankee devil, and Harvard dignitaries, all speaking in a poetic semi-colloquial idiom, localize and Americanize the story of Lord Ravensbane. Yet it was MacKaye's achievement to make his devil a much-travelled fellow who knew his way around the world with *ut* clauses and Latin subjunctives and to give his "poetified pumpkin" a universal significance.

MacKaye continued to work with American themes. In *Yankee Fantasies*, written from 1901 until 1906 and published in 1912, he continued to explore the possibilities of the New England past in such one-act plays as *Sam Average* and *Gettysburg*. From 1908 to 1912 he turned to the contemporary scene in three comedies, written in prose and thoroughly prosey in conception, in *Mater* (1908), *Anti-Matrimony* (1910), and *Tomorrow* (1912). *Mater* is the story of a woman who married her employer to insure a relative's success in a political campaign; the humor is heavily handled and the ending inconclusive. *Anti-Matrimony*

is a satire upon the free thought of Europe and its effect upon the younger generation in America. *Tomorrow*, however, is the very kind of play which *Anti-Matrimony* burlesqued, a dramatization of the same theme as Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Brieux's *Damaged Goods*. One may ask why MacKaye, the champion of poetic drama, wandered into the ways of prose realism. Perhaps he was simply experimenting in one more genre; perhaps he sought to bring the artist and the public closer together, and considered prose a more suitable vehicle than poetry. At any rate, the three comedies of the American scene but illustrate how ill-adapted he was to prose realism and how distinctly poetic and pageantic were his talents.

In the years that MacKaye was discovering material in New England history and legend, Moody was exploring the contemporary Western scene, prospecting for a likely setting for themes already in mind. A pack trip across the Continental Divide in 1901 and a trip to the Grand Canyon and Arizona Plateau in 1904 impressed him with the beauty of the landscape and the sense of "a new world, with new laws, new ethics, new people." This spirit he sought to embody in *The Sabine Woman*, later entitled *The Great Divide*, but he feared that the story of a girl left alone in her father's cabin and attacked by three ruffians might prove realism of a "rather grim and uncompromising type." He had given up the hope of finding any producer and booked passage for Spain in the spring of 1906, when Henry Miller and Margaret Anglin decided to produce *The Sabine Woman* in Chicago. The Chicago performance, however, passed more or less unnoticed. Moody spent the entire summer re-working the plot, developing the character of Ruth Jordan, and finally changing the title to *The Great Divide*. When the play opened in New York in October, 1906, it was hailed as the great American drama, long-looked-for, come at last. After two seasons in New York, it was successful on the London stage, even though the reviewers were inclined to dwell on its more sensational and melodramatic elements. From the Arizona landscape which he admired and the freedom of spirit which he believed he found there, Moody had created a play which audiences recognized as American.

The Great Divide belongs in part to the Western thriller category with Stephen Ghent as a recognizable descendant of Davy Crockett and other diamond-in-the-rough heroes. Actually the plot is not so different from Augustus Thomas's *Arizona* and David Belasco's *Girl of the Golden West*. Belasco's Girl, Minnie, runs her father's bar, falls in love with the outlaw Johnson, conceals him in her cabin, cheats at cards with her former lover to save herself, and runs away with the reformed Johnson to a happy life ever after. Moody's Ruth Jordan is left alone in a cabin at night, when three ruffians ride up, Belasco fashion. She offers herself to the likeliest one if he will save her from the other two. He turns out to be a fine fellow, reforms, redeems the family fortunes, and wins Ruth's love for a they-lived-happily-ever-after conclusion. Unlike Belasco, however, Moody added what he called "inherent poetry," which for the more thoughtful play-goer elevated the play into something significantly American. He sought to translate into modern life some of the same perplexities and conflicts of *The Masque of Judgment* and *The Fire-Bringer*, that is, the sense of Hebraism and the renunciation of life, on the one hand, and the sense of Hellenism and all the joys of life, on the other. Puritanism has set off the East from the West; furthermore, it has set the soul at war with itself, with what is forbidden and what is desired. But love will work out a reconciliation until there will be a good life achieved in the end. Moody's originality, in comparison with that of Thomas or Belasco, lies in his perception of this fundamental dichotomy of American life and in his translation of the philosophic antithesis into terms of stage conflict. It was his good fortune to take a popular, already established form and endow it with a psychology, a philosophy, and a poetry of expression which the audience recognized as fundamentally American.

Moody's other prose play, *The Faith Healer*, disappointed the very audiences who had applauded *The Great Divide*. As early as 1895, Moody had begun a blank verse drama suggested by the newspaper accounts of Francis Schlatter, a Denver healer who was popularly called the New Mexican Messiah. By 1899, Moody had recast the play in prose and completed it in its first form.

After the success of *The Great Divide*, the producers Henry Miller and Donald Robertson both became interested in the possibilities of an equally gripping play, and once more Moody set about to revise the earlier Schlatter story, using William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* to make the character of his mystic healer more convincing. *The Faith Healer* opened in St. Louis in March, 1909, but its stage career was brief and dismal. After five nights it was forced to close. Moody continued to condense and revise it before the New York performance the following winter, but the Broadway audience was scarcely more willing than the St. Louis theatre-goers to understand it, and after several weeks it was withdrawn, never to have another commercial production.

In the figure of Ulrich Michaelis Moody saw the possibility of symbolizing the need for faith, even the mystic power of faith, in the modern world. Michaelis suggests such figures as Manson in *The Servant in the House*, the Stranger in *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*, and Pastor Sarg in *Beyond Human Power*. But unlike Manson and the Drain Man, Moody's Faith Healer makes no attack upon the clergy nor an overt appeal to the brotherhood and basic goodness of mankind, and unlike Pastor Sarg he suggests that one can, and must, go "beyond human power" and live in a miracle of joy that casts off asceticism and ennobles religious faith. Ulrich Michaelis is a poet's creation, and his play has a poet's language and a poet's message. Moody sought to bring to the bare Missouri scene a sense of the wonder of language, marked by an almost Biblical simplicity and rhythm. Certainly this ability to probe through the commonplace scene to its inner significance, its inherent poetry, and to express it in prose at once simple and poetic is the quality which distinguishes Moody from any of the other poet-playwrights.

After Moody's success with prose drama, Robinson, who had sworn that poetry was the only thing he knew to do and he would stick to it, determined to try his hand at prose tragic-comedy. *Van Zorn* and *The Porcupine*, written in 1907 and 1908 but not published until 1914 and 1915, are ironic studies of frustration and failure. Robinson simply cannot make his characters speak

directly nor standout distinctly. What concerns him are the varying moods and the whole psychological welter beneath the surface of life. For him one motive must fit inside another like intricately wrought Chinese boxes. Robinson realized, shrewd critic that he was, that his dramatic efforts had come to nothing, that his oblique point of view, which was his chief originality in poetry, was his chief flaw in drama. After 1913, he wrote no more dramas.

The work of the Poets' Theatre as a group had ceased by 1914. Robinson had returned to verse. Moody had died in October, 1910. *The Wolf of Gubbio*, published in 1913, marked the end of Miss Peabody's plays, and, with the exception of the prose *Portrait of Mrs. W*, the end of her dramatic ability. Of the five poet-playwrights, MacKaye and Torrence alone continued to further the ideal of an American poetic drama, the former with pageantry and folk plays, and the latter with three short but extremely significant plays for a Negro theatre. It is necessary to keep in mind that MacKaye kept his hope bright for a "Theatre of Democracy" with a poetic and native drama that would render the American people articulate, and that MacKaye more than any other continued to further that end.

MacKaye found material for a national drama in the simple folkways and folk speech of a people still untouched by the mechanistic standardization of the modern world. The people of the Appalachian ridges caught his imagination, even in the early years of his work as playwright-poet, in such a play as *Chuck*, one of the *Yankee Fantasies* with a modern rather than an historical setting. After MacKaye came to know the life of the Kentucky hills, he dreamt of an Appalachian Theatre. It would help to conserve the plastic, poetic idiom of the native speech in its most creative forms; it would develop an appreciation for the magnificently poetic imagination of a people compounded of Aesop and Chaucer and Baron Munchhausen; and finally, by being faithfully local, it would at the same time be truly American. His only folk plays, *This Fine-Pretty World* (1923) and *Kentucky Fantasies* (1928), together with the work of the Carolina Playmakers under the direction of Professor Koch, marked

the first steps in the establishment of an American folk drama that sought to do for the Southern mountaineer what Synge, for instance, had done for the Aran Islanders. MacKaye fairly glories in the native idiom Beem Sprattling, the magnificent "lie-swearer" in *This Fine-Pretty World*, praises "A-prile" in a poetic speech that suggests the merriment and joy of a fourteenth century "Aprille," and Uncle Lark in *Napoleon Crossing the Rockies* unlocks all the dancing legions of his spirit with a song of his own making.

Seven years before MacKaye began to write of the Kentucky Mountain people, Torrence was at work on another phase of American folk drama, using scenes and situations that he remembered from his boyhood in Xenia, Ohio, and looking forward to the establishment of a Negro theatre where his plays might be suitably produced. To understand the distinct contribution of Torrence to the American Negro drama, it is necessary to keep in mind that there was no adequate stage interpretation of Negro life before 1914. To quote Heywood Broun's words, Negro life meant little to the theatre but "burnt cork, lumbago and the word 'massa'." Not a single play, not even Sheldon's melodrama, *The Nigger*, had tried to catch either the poetic comedy or the intense tragedy inherent in the race. After Torrence saw the Abbey Players in 1911-1912, he resolved to give his boyhood memories of Negro life artistic embodiment. *Granny Maumee*, performed by the Stage Society in New York in 1914, was his first effort. *The Rider of Dreams* and *Simon the Cyrenian* followed in 1917. Torrence had the good fortune to have the three plays staged in New York in 1917 with an all Negro cast, under the direction of Robert Edmund Jones, whose staging and costuming helped to make the production successful. Since this was the first time that serious plays of Negro life had been presented by an all Negro cast, the performance was of singular importance to the whole future of the Negro theatre.

Torrence's three one-act plays opened the way for an entire Negro drama. *Granny Maumee* dramatized the sense of racial pride and coherence and almost epic suffering, together with a suggestion of the whole weird African background which Ameri-

can civilization cannot quite subdue. *The Rider of Dreams* portrayed the Negro as a magnificent dreamer, bewildered in a practical world that had no time for dreaming. *Simon the Cyrenian*, perhaps more unusual than either of the preceding plays, represented the burden of Negro life symbolically in the portrayal of Simon as the black man who offered to bear the cross until such time as Christ should come into his own. In these plays Torrence indicated how far he had come from the historical costume play, from the bombast *El Dorado* and the prettified speeches of *Héloise*. Negro folk ways and folk speech he had shown to be far more poetic than conventional historical subject matter and blank verse.

By 1926 the Negro could write of his own body of drama and his own theatrical groups. He could point to the Ethiopian Art Theatre and the Howard University Players; he could name plays of Paul Green and Eugene O'Neill in which his race was interpreted with power and understanding. By 1930 the critic of American drama could speak of a native folk drama, of which the Negro theatre was a part. By 1939 Professor Koch could edit a volume of American folk plays which interpret every locale in very much the manner of the local color short story of the nineteenth century. In this broad movement of twentieth century folk drama, MacKaye and Torrence each has a place. Their contribution lies in their insistence that the Kentucky mountaineer and the Negro should be interpreted imaginatively, with a poet's insight and sympathy. They discovered almost at their doorsteps a people who had not shut their lips on poetry and who spoke proud and living words. MacKaye and Torrence helped to show other American playwrights that Beem Sprattlings and Madison Sparrows are as magnificent dreamers as the Conquistadors and Joan of Arc, and that Zephyrus blows equally sweet upon the "A-prile" of the Nine Gaps and the Seven Ridges.

It is difficult to evaluate the work of the five poet-playwrights. Certainly no permanent movement for a poetic theatre resulted, and thus their record is one of failure. Yet if their efforts are projected against the background of American drama in the late 1890's and early 1900's, they gather a surprising significance. The

group as a whole made certain important gains. They brought the poetic play out of the category of mere closet drama. They proved that an occasional poetic play could succeed on Broadway as well as *Shenandoah* and *The Virginian* and *Foxy Grandpa*. They showed what a diversity of theme the poetic drama could make its own. Before they began to work together in 1904, the historical costume play meant *Secret Service* and *Barbara Frietchie*, not *Jeanne d'Arc* and *The Scarecrow*. The Western thriller meant *Arizona* and *The Girl of the Golden West*, not *The Great Divide*. The fantasy meant the talking flowers and the floating souls of Madison Cawein's *Shadow Garden*, and not the songs of the children and the call of the strolling player in Miss Peabody's best known play.

The five succeeded in throwing off the gloomy tyranny of Ibsen, against which MacKaye had inveighed in *The Playhouse and the Play*. And their message, in so far as they can be said to have any unanimity of thinking, is one of hopefulness. Not a single one succeeded in writing tragedy. With the exception of MacKaye and Robinson, none tried. They centered their attention upon the fantastic and pageantic elements of any chosen subject rather than upon a treatment of its tragic aspects. There is a place in the world, they would seem to say, for the rider of dreams who can prance to heaven beyond the sun and the moon. Miss Peabody urges mankind to keep its child-spirit of wonder and joy. MacKaye, even though he wrote *Sappho and Phaon* and subtitled it "A Tragedy," sees essentially the fine-pretty world of an April morning. Moody's world is less joyous, shadowed as it is by anguish and longing, but even he sees man conquering his suffering with a transcendent nobility of spirit.

The playwrights of the Poet's Theatre attempted to interpret the American scene with more accuracy and imagination than any dramatist before them. With the exception of Miss Peabody, all depicted some part of contemporary American life. MacKaye peered into the Yankee past to find Feathertop and Sam Average, and into the Kentucky Mountain present to find Samp Green and Beem Sprattling. Robinson saw the psychological complexities

beneath the seemingly uneventful life of a Massachusetts village. Moody made the popular Western melodrama a vehicle for the expression of a definitely American psychological diversity. Perhaps more than any of the other playwrights he had the profundity of mind that perceived fundamental philosophical needs in American life and the desire to give them artistic embodiment in poems and plays. And for that reason, namely that he did possess this perception, together with the ability to give it a highly finished artistic form, Moody is, perhaps, the most significant of the five.

Despite the efforts of Moody and his fellow playwrights from 1904 until 1910, and the continued efforts of MacKaye and Torrence in later years, the poetic drama has had no flowering season in twentieth century America. Perhaps the chief difficulty of these dramatists lay in their inability to adapt their dramatic form to their poetic medium. Instead they adapted their verse to old dramatic forms that have now lost a large share of their vitality in the theatre. In an essay on "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" (1920), T. S. Eliot remarked that the Elizabethan Age in England could absorb new thoughts and images because it had a great vital form in which to confine them. But the tradition of the blank verse play was dead by the opening of the nineteenth century, and poets were left to create their own form. But the task was too great. "No man," Eliot declared in the same essay, "can invent a form, create a taste for it and perfect it too." The poets of the early twentieth century theatre were for the most part content with the old blank verse chronicle-play form that provided a number of scenes linked together by the life of the leading character or else they employed pseudo-classical forms with the intervention of gods and chorus. They succeeded only rarely in a happy fusion of lyric and dramatic elements. Moody, for instance, made no attempt to adapt the use of the chorus to the demands of the stage, as Eliot has recently done in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

No play-maker has yet been able to achieve the perfect fusion of poetry and drama for the modern stage, but the hope still remains that the day will come when the great poet and the great

dramatist will be one. Such contemporary playwrights as T. S. Eliot and Maxwell Anderson and W. H. Auden continue to keep alive the same desire for a poetic theatre that animated Moody and MacKaye. Critics like Lee Simonson and Ashley Dukes repeatedly point out that the theatre thirsts and famishes for the want of words. Only the poetic drama supplies the actor's demand for the vital word. In an essay on "Poetry in the Theatre," Maxwell Anderson expresses his belief that now is the time for our clowning and burlesquing amusements to be transformed "into a national art of power and beauty"; a great dramatic poet must come soon to make the transformation, "a poet comparable to Aeschylus in Greece or Marlowe in England."

The Marlowe or the Aeschylus is yet to come, but the belief in the universality and the permanence of the poetic play has not wanted. Maxwell Anderson's words almost echo Percy MacKaye's, uttered three decades earlier in the lectures on *The Playhouse and the Play*. The five poets who found the theatre their "great resouce" in the early years of the twentieth century helped to create a body of worth-while American drama, imaginative and inherently poetic in concept; what is more important, they kept alive the desire for poetry in the theatre in the years when Broadway advertised *The Virginian*, *the Darling of the Gods*, and *Florodora*. Perhaps, one may prophesy that as long as man is the dreamer and desirer that Moody believed, there will be those who will continue to hope for the return of poetry to the stage and will follow along the way of the Poets' Theatre toward some future poetic drama.

VITA

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